



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on October 2, 2012

Will Common Core Standards Solve the Reading Problem?

According to the Associated Press of May 25, 2012, SAT reading scores for the high school class of 2011 were “the lowest on record, and combined reading and math scores fell to their lowest since 1955.” The cause of this precipitous decline? Whole language instruction.

Also, a 2009 study by the Program for International Student Assessment showed U.S. 15-year-old students ranking internationally 25th in math, 17th in science, and 14th in reading. Not much to show for the billions of dollars spent on American public education.



Will the institution of Common Core Standards lift us out of this pit of embarrassing failure? Will it finally relegate whole language to the dumpster of educational quackery? In case you don't know what whole language is, here's a definition given by three professors of education in a book entitled *Whole Language, What's the Difference?* published in 1991. We read on page 32:

Whole language represents a major shift in thinking about the reading process. Rather than viewing reading as “getting the words,” whole language educators view reading as essentially a process of creating meanings ... Meaning is created through a transaction with whole, meaningful texts (i.e., texts of any length that were written with the intent to communicate meaning).

It is a transaction, not an extraction of the meaning from the print, in the sense that the reader-created meanings are a fusion of what the reader brings and what the text offers ... Although students who learn to read in whole language classrooms are, like all proficient readers, eventually able to “read” (or identify) a large inventory of words, learning words is certainly not the goal of whole language.

Another passage from page 19 of the same book may be even more illuminating:

From a whole-language perspective, reading (and language use in general) is a process of generating hypotheses in a meaning-making transaction in a sociohistorical context. As a transactional process ... reading is not a matter of “getting the meaning” from text, as if that meaning were in the text waiting to be decoded by the reader.

Rather, reading is a matter of readers using the cues print provides and the knowledge they bring with them (of language subsystems, of the world) to construct a unique interpretation.

Moreover, that interpretation is situated: readers' creations (not retrievals) of meaning with text vary, depending on their purposes of reading and the expectations of others in the reading event. This view of reading implies that there is no single “correct” meaning for a given text, only plausible meanings.

We would accept such pedagogical insanity if we knew that it actually helped students learn to read. But it doesn't. In fact, it not only creates reading failure but the methodology itself injures a child's



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brain. It forces the child to use his space-oriented right brain to do the work of the language-oriented left brain.

Were any reading experts aware of this? Were there any professors anywhere in America who could see the dangers of whole language? Fortunately, there were. In July 1955, an unprecedented action was taken by 40 professors of linguistics from Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the University of Massachusetts, Brandeis, and Boston University. They sent a letter Robert V. Antonucci, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, strongly criticizing the state's intention of mandating whole language as the standard of reading instruction in the new state curriculum. They wrote:

We are researchers in linguistics and psycholinguistics — and Massachusetts residents. We are writing to raise certain questions about the inclusion of contentious and, in our view, scientifically unfounded views of language in the sections on reading instruction of the draft Curriculum Content Chapter on Language Arts (“Constructing and Conveying Meaning”), recently circulated by the Massachusetts Department of Education....

The proposed Content Chapter replaces the common-sense view of reading as the decoding of notated speech with a surprising view of reading, as directly “constructing meaning.” According to the document, “constructing meaning” is a process that can be achieved using many “strategies” (guessing, contextual cues, etc.). In this view, the decoding of written words plays a relatively minor role in reading compared to strategies such as contextual guessing. This treats the alphabetic nature of our writing system as little more than an accident, when in fact it is the most important property of written English — a linguistic achievement of historic importance....

We want to alert the educational authorities of Massachusetts to the fact that the view of language research presented in this document is inaccurate, and that the claimed consequences for reading instruction should therefore be subjected to serious reexamination....

As linguists, we are concerned that the Commonwealth, through its powers to set standards for schools, should presume to legislate an erroneous view of how human language works, a view that runs counter to most of the major scientific results of more than 100 years of linguistics and psycholinguistics. We are even more concerned that uninformed thinking about language should be at the heart of a “standards” document for Massachusetts schools.

The letter was signed by the 40 professors, among whom were Prof. Emmon Bach of the University of Massachusetts and president of the Linguistic Society of America; Dr. David Caplan, Massachusetts General Hospital, Director of the Reading Disability Clinic; Prof. Ray Jackendoff of Brandeis University, author of *Patterns of the Mind*; Prof. Steven Pinker of MIT, author of *The Language Instinct*; plus several professors of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT.

A cover letter from MIT's Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, signed by Prof. David Pesetsky and Dr. Janis Melvold of Massachusetts General Hospital, accompanied the letter from the 40 professors. It reads:

We enclose a letter signed by forty experts on language and on reading — all of whom are Massachusetts residents (and many of whom are parents).... The sort of instruction advocated in the draft Curriculum Framework (often called “Whole Language”) has already been adopted as a standard in various jurisdictions. In many of these jurisdictions (most recently, California), it is widely blamed for serious declines in reading achievement.

They then provided a dissertation on how reading should be properly taught: “Learning how to decode



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the speech sounds notated by the writing system ('phonics') is fundamental to reading." They then requested a meeting with the commissioner "at which these issues can be discussed."

The professors received a response from the commissioner, dated August 4, which they considered inadequate and answered with another letter on August 10, 1995. It consisted of a lengthy discourse on the needed reform in reading instruction. They wrote:

Our personal interest in this issue arose from our dismay as linguists and parents at the misinformation about language and reading that too often guides instructional practice. As a consequence our discussions with colleagues (culminating in the group letter from forty linguists and psycholinguistics), Massachusetts now has an opportunity which we hope you will want to take advantage of.

A report in the *Boston Globe* of November 7, 1995, shed some light on what then transpired. It said:

With the city of Boston now embarked on a 10-year campaign to get all third graders reading at grade level, effective reading instruction has become a critical issue. Most Boston schools, and most schools across Massachusetts, educators say, have adopted some form of the whole-language approach.... Whole language has been on the rise in most school districts for the last 10 years.

An early draft of those standards drew fire from a group of 40 linguists, psychologists and other academics who claim that whole language has been a disaster where it has been tried elsewhere — particularly in California, where reading scores went down after a whole-language curriculum was adopted....

[M]any conservatives have adopted the fight against whole language as part of a back-to-basics campaign, and as a reaction against what they view as faddish innovations by liberal-minded educators....

"This is part of an orchestrated campaign by the far right, and some of these academics have wandered into this without realizing who they're getting in bed with," said Ken Goodman, professor of education at the University of Arizona and a leader of the whole-language movement.

Scare tactics and politics prevailed in California, Goodman said, where a task force recently condemned whole language and the state Legislature called for an immediate return to phonics instruction. Goodman acknowledged that California reading scores plummeted to last among the 40 states that do the testing after whole-language methods were adopted state-wide — but he blamed school budget cuts, not the whole-language method.

And how does the new drive for Common Core Standards deal with this problem? Here's the opening descriptive paragraph of the 43 pages devoted to Common Core Language Arts:

Reading:

One of the key requirements of the Common Core State Standards for Reading is that all students must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school. By the time they complete the core, students must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers. The first part of this section makes a research-based case for why the complexity of what students read matters. In brief, while reading demands in college, workforce training programs, and life in general have held steady or increased over the last half century, K-12 texts have actually declined in sophistication, and relatively little attention has been paid to students' ability to read complex



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texts independently. These conditions have left a serious gap between many high school seniors' reading ability and the reading requirements they will face after graduation. The second part of this section addresses how text complexity can be measured and made a regular part of instruction. It introduces a three-part model that blends qualitative and quantitative measures of text complexity with reader and task considerations.

The section concludes with three annotated examples showing how the model can be used to assess the complexity of various kinds of texts appropriate for different grade levels.

Anyone who has the stomach to read through the 43 pages devoted to Language Arts will come away annoyed by the needless complexity of the Core's approach to our reading problems, which Noah Webster solved with his little *Blue-Backed Speller* which made early Americans the most literate people on earth. And he did it with a book that could fit in your pocket.

The Core does deal with phonemic awareness but in the most complicated way possible. Simple intensive systematic phonics is nowhere to be found. This is basically a whole-language approach with phonemic awareness thrown in to give the impression that it is really teaching letter-sound equivalents. A glance over the bibliography shows references to university studies of reading that are as opaque as the Common Core Standards themselves. A reference in a footnote to L.S. Vygotsky, the Marxist psychologist who worked in Pavlov's laboratory in Moscow, gives the reader an idea where all of these Core creators are coming from. There are no references in the bibliography or elsewhere to Sue Dickson's phonics program, or this writer's *Alpha-Phonics*, which has taught thousands of homeschoolers to read very well.

In other words, the Common Core Standards in reading are a fraud that will cost billions of dollars to implement and will not solve the reading problem.



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